United Nations A/56/PV.103

General Assembly
Fifty-sixth session

Official Records

103rd plenary meeting
Tuesday, 18 June 2002, 10 a.m.
New York

President: Mr. Han Seung-soo ..... (Republic of Korea)

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Agenda item 12 (*continued*)

Report of the Economic and Social Council

Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies for development

Mr. Prelog (Croatia): First of all, let me take this opportunity to thank you, Mr. President, for convening this important meeting devoted to information and communication technologies (ICT) for development, because, as stated in the United Nations Millennium Declaration

> "the central challenge we face today is to ensure that globalization becomes a positive force for all the world's people". (*resolution 55/2, para. 5*)

Indeed, information and communication technologies are definitely crucial to resolving this challenge, as was also emphasized by the 2000 ministerial declaration of the Economic and Social Council, where it is stated that

> "We recognize a wide consensus that information and communication technologies (ICT) are central to the creation of the emerging global knowledge-based economy and can play an important role in accelerating growth, in promoting sustainable development and eradicating poverty in developing countries as well as countries with economies in transition and in facilitating their effective integration into the global economy." (*A/55/3/Rev.1, chap. III, para. 17, pp. 19-20*)

Bridging the digital divide is also one of the goals in the Secretary-General's road map towards the implementation of the Millennium Declaration. Therefore, speaking in the name of the Croatian Government, I would like to assure the Assembly that we regard ICT as the most pervasive generic technology of the present time. I will thus report on the current status of the ICT sector and information society in Croatia. Additionally, I will speak about the Croatian Government's activities and efforts to improve the present situation. I believe that Croatian problems are similar to those encountered in other countries, especially those with economies in transition, and that the experiences gained by various countries should be shared to mutual benefit. This is also a reason why I commend the convening of this Meeting.

Let me now give a brief report on the current status of the ICT sector and information society in my country. Croatia is a Central, Mediterranean and South-East European country with a population of about 4.5 million people. Its gross domestic product (GDP) amounts to $22 billion, or slightly less than $5,000 per capita. The total ICT market value amounts to 7 per cent of GDP. The installed base for personal computers is estimated at 600,000 units, which represents approximately 13 units per 100 inhabitants.

This record contains the text of speeches delivered in English and of the interpretation of speeches delivered in the other languages. Corrections should be submitted to the original languages only. They should be incorporated in a copy of the record and sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned to the Chief of the Verbatim Reporting Service, room C-178. Corrections will be issued after the end of the session in a consolidated corrigendum.

02-43000 (E)

The telecommunications environment is characterized by 1.8 million fixed lines and 1.4 million mobile lines; that is to say, 40 fixed and 31 mobile lines, respectively, per 100 inhabitants. Internet access connections are estimated to be at 325,000 units. The total number of Internet users is more than 500,000 — some say it is even 600,000 — thus giving an Internet penetration rate of at least 12 per cent of the population, and perhaps even 13 or 14 per cent. Taking into account both business-to-consumer and business-to-business end-use, e-commerce value is $1 million annually.

The information technology area of the Croatian economy is completely privatized. Several large and a number of medium and small companies exist and operate relatively successfully. The telecommunication market is partly liberalized, that is, there is only one fixed-line operator and two mobile operators. The technological level of the telecommunication infrastructure and the level of professional experience are satisfactory and, I would say, better than in other countries with economies in transition.

There are several Internet service providers, but they all depend on the same fixed-line telecommunication operator. The best diffusion and the most advanced level of service has been achieved within the academic community, where a 10-year tradition of using the Internet already exists.

Governmental and public information systems are mainly closed within their own sectors, with little interoperability and lacking a unified interface. Government and public institution web pages are common, but e-commerce and e-administration are still in initial phases.

I shall now talk about the efforts made by the Croatian Government in the last two years to improve the situation.

At the beginning of this year, the Government adopted its ICT strategy, which is called "Bringing Croatia into the twenty-first century". The Croatian Parliament has approved the strategy, which is fully compatible with the eEurope Action Plan of the European Union. Of course, that strategy takes our local circumstances into account. It gives the Government 17 recommendations, which are in turn further refined into activities with known actors and deadlines.

In the year 2000, the Croatian Government established the Office for Internet Infrastructure Development. Under the direct control of the Deputy Prime Minister, this small office coordinates ICT activities performed by various ministries and hired private institutions. So far, the office has mainly been preoccupied with the information infrastructure of Government bodies. In the future, it will take a leading role in implementing the recently adopted ICT strategy.

At the end of 2001, the Ministry of Science and Technology delivered project proposals for building a private network connecting all Government bodies, including the Parliament and the President's office. The proposed network would speed up the internal functioning of government structures and would provide a common government Internet portal to the public. The network is now under construction. Part of the network already implemented serves to conduct electronic sessions of the Government, where all materials are prepared in electronic form and ministers use their monitors instead of standard documentation.

At the beginning of this year, the Croatian Parliament adopted the electronic signature bill, which fully complies with European Union directives. This act will enable electronic document flow among Government bodies and public institutions, and it will stimulate e-commerce in general. Other European Union laws in the area of ICT exist as draft proposals; for instance, there is a data protection act and a new version of the telecommunication act.

In order to stimulate the growth of small and medium enterprises and academic entrepreneurship, the Ministry of Science and Technology has recently launched a technological development programme called HITRA. With a yearly budget of about $10 million, the Ministry finances promising development projects and innovative production plans.

Some important things could also be said about the Croatian Academic and Research Network (CARNet), which has recently become a fully integrated part of the European GEANT project. A GEANT pop-up node now resides in Zagreb, and it will probably serve to link the academic networks of other neighbouring countries with GEANT.

Croatian academic institutions are now connected with their European counterparts by a 622 megabits per second link, which enables various forms of international scientific collaboration, including

distance learning and teleconferencing. Last year all Croatian primary and secondary schools were connected to the Internet by ISDN channels, as a result of collaboration between the Ministry of Education and Croatian Telecom.

Finally, I would like to mention that the Croatian Academy of Science and Arts, together with UNESCO, started an extensive ICT application programme in teacher education and training, the objective of which is to prepare more than 45,000 elementary and secondary school teachers to use ICT in their curricula. This programme also establishes a scientific, professional and methodological platform for the introduction of ICT at all levels and phases of the educational process in the Republic of Croatia.

I will now end my statement with the following conclusions.

Regarding the development of ICT, Croatia has certain advantages compared to other countries with economies in transition. For instance, it has a well-developed and technically advanced telecommunications network.

Over the last two years, after a period of stagnation, Croatia has been trying very hard to catch up with neighbouring countries. Relying on our own advantages, we have now succeeded in reaching Central European averages of ICT development indicators. Our expectation is that our country should take a leading role, at least in the South-East European region.

During the next period we plan to make major breakthroughs in the areas of e-government, e-education and e-health, gigabit academic networking and liberalization of the telecom market.

Recent experience has shown that, at least in our country, the private sector and market forces are still not strong enough to promote all digital opportunities. Therefore, the involvement of the Government and public sector remains necessary and welcome. Indeed, public-private cooperation is encouraged by the Government, and it is hoped that this will bear the best results.

Mr. Niehaus (Costa Rica) (*spoke in Spanish*): Today humanity stands at an unprecedented crossroads. During the past decade, the development of new information and communication technologies (ICT) has opened many opportunities for economic growth and social progress. Today the wealth and poverty of peoples and nations is determined by their capacity to implement and benefit from the new technologies. Thanks to the digital revolution, knowledge and information are nowadays the main source of wealth and development. In today's globalized world, success depends on our ability to adapt to circumstances and opportunities provided by the new technologies.

Nevertheless, the introduction of these new technologies has produced uneven rates of growth. Economic growth in developed countries has accelerated, while most developing countries have been left behind. At the same time, within each of our nations, the wealthier strata of society enjoy state-of-the-art technology, while the poorer strata of society find themselves unable to access it. The very speed and momentum of new technologies multiply their social and economic effects, and their tendency to dominate widens the digital divide. This is why we are gratified to see the General Assembly now studying how to narrow the divide and how to use technology for the enhancement of social and economic development in all our countries.

The digital revolution provides new opportunities for growth in developing countries. New technologies allow us to compete in the global market, increasing our productivity, while taking advantage of the economies of scale and increasing our competitiveness.

Furthermore, if we make wise use of these opportunities, we can close the digital divide within each of our nations and thus build fairer societies. But this is no easy task. In order to reap the greatest possible benefits from the digital revolution, we, the developing countries, must firmly and resolutely respond to the challenge that it presents. What is required is an exercise of strong political leadership to develop and implement a coherent development strategy based on ICT. Such a strategy should be efficient — in other words, it should use new technologies based on the best available technical standards. But it must also be fair; it must democratize access to new knowledge, and it should promote the development of human capital. Finally, such a strategy should become an ongoing, firm and proactive State policy that, in all its aspects, will leave its mark on our nations' future development.

It is indispensable for developing countries to guarantee the entire population access to new

technologies and to the tremendous wealth of information that is now available. We must build the necessary infrastructure to use new technologies and knowledge. We must adopt regulations and standards that will promote investment in these new technologies. We must creatively develop state-of-the-art technology and coordinate the efforts of public and private entities.

It is vital that we invest systematically and ardently in our human resources, devoting as many resources as possible to education. We must strengthen the level of knowledge and the creative capacity of our people, since they are our principal asset and the best instruments for placing us in today's globalized world.

My country, Costa Rica, is already applying a strategy of this type. We are committed to guaranteeing Internet access for all Costa Rican citizens, including people in rural areas. We have designed a project to establish an advanced Internet network with which we aspire to become one of the first totally wired countries. We would like to modernize the national telecommunications system by integrating voice, data and video services.

We are investing in high-capacity infrastructure, with broadband connections that will be compatible with existing platforms and also able to adapt to future technologies. We are connecting the country using high-capacity trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific cables, while extending our national fibre optic network. Our short-term goal is to arrive at DSL interconnection at a rate of 2.5 for each 100 inhabitants. We also have set up a national advanced research network called Internet 2 for graduate education and research.

My country promotes and welcomes investment in high technology. Thanks to our political and economic stability, our population's high level of education and the fact that we have many highly specialized and technical professionals, we have been able to attract important foreign companies. At the same time, we are promoting the local creation and production of advanced technology, and this is already yielding fruit. Indeed, advanced technology is our main export product and the most active segment of our economy.

Costa Rica seeks to extend the benefits of new technologies to the entire population. In the area of health, we are now promoting remote diagnosis, exchange of high-resolution medical imaging, distance training and cooperative projects with advanced medical centres. We are promoting distance learning and teaching, as well as the use of electronic libraries. We have provided universal access to e-mail, assigning every Costa Rican citizen an e-mail account. Public institutions have made all relevant information available on the Web, thereby improving the quality of public services.

The only way to close the digital divide is to enthusiastically embrace advanced technology. We cannot be left behind; we cannot let the opportunities that it provides pass us by. We must educate our people so that they can wisely use and benefit from the potential for growth and progress that are being made available. We must invest in essential infrastructure in order to become part of the new digital society. This unquestionably requires a strong political commitment. The choice is ours.

Mr. Htoo (Myanmar): My delegation would like first of all to thank the President of the General Assembly, Mr. Han Seung-soo, for taking the initiative to hold this important Meeting on information and communication technologies for development. It is not only timely, but also appropriate, for the Assembly to take the lead in bridging the digital divide. This new divide has not only resulted in the marginalization of people in developing countries, but also made them feel frustrated at being left out of the benefits of the global information society and knowledge-based economy. My delegation truly believes that this Meeting will help us to address the issue of the digital divide and generate the necessary political will to effectively pursuit this issue.

My delegation fully associates itself with the statement made at this Meeting by the representative of Venezuela, which currently holds the chairmanship of the Group of 77 and China.

"Information" and "knowledge" are keywords today for bringing economic development and reducing poverty throughout the world. However, information and knowledge are not disseminated equally or on an automatic basis. Advances in computer, Internet and communication technologies make it possible for people around the world to interact with each other, making the world a global village. Yet more than 4 billion people around the world are still deprived of new technological opportunities. People in urban areas are able to acquire information and knowledge

undreamed of by people in rural and remote parts of developing countries, where billions of people live. There is growing concern that the digital divide has widened further, instead of narrowing.

The major problem facing us is how to make information and knowledge available to underprivileged communities. In this regard, my delegation was encouraged by the various initiatives put forward by the international community aimed at bridging the digital divide, such as the Digital Opportunity Task Force, the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Task Force, the ICT activities of the New Partnership for Africa's Development and so forth.

However, in our view these initiatives alone will not be sufficient to solve the problem. We share the view that concerted actions at the national, regional and international levels are needed to address issues relating to lack of infrastructure, connectivity, local content, capacity-building and investment to promote ICT. In this context, we join many other delegations in welcoming the initiative of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) to hold the World Summit on the Information Society in December 2003 at Geneva and in December 2005 at Tunis. My delegation would like in particular to commend the work of the United Nations ICT Task Force in promoting ICT for development applications, developing modalities to strengthen the ICT capacity of developing countries, assisting Member States in creating ICT strategies and policies and forging strategic partnerships between the United Nations system, private industry and other relevant international actors.

Appropriate national initiatives are also needed to supplement regional and international efforts. In Myanmar, the development and use of information and communication technologies are still at a nascent stage. Recognizing that ICT could leapfrog the economic development process, the Government is providing guidance, encouragement and necessary support and assistance for ICT development in Myanmar. The Government has established the Myanmar Computer Confederation, which has prepared an information technology master plan for Myanmar, as well as the Myanmar Computer Technology Development Council to promote ICT awareness and enhance the application of technology.

At the regional level, Myanmar, as a member of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), takes part in the e-ASEAN Framework adopted in November 2000 by the leaders of the ASEAN countries at the Fourth Informal Summit. In line with that Framework, the Government has established the Myanmar e-National Task Force, which has six working committees. Under the guidance of the e-National Task Force, efforts are being made for the development of e-commerce, e-government, e-education, the preparation of cyber laws and the improvement of the ICT infrastructure in Myanmar.

In 2001, a private sector initiative, the Myanmar ICT Park, was established with the collaboration of 30 local private companies. Equipped with an adequate ICT infrastructure, it is designed to compete in the international information technology market. A company called Bagan Cybertech IDC and Teleport was also established in 2000 to provide modern communication services to local and foreign information technology companies, as well as satellite links to create an Intranet covering the whole country.

The Myanmar Ministry of Education, with the contribution of the private sector and local communities, has also encouraged schools to install multimedia classrooms as effective learning and teaching tools. Almost 500 schools throughout the country now have multimedia classrooms, including computer laboratories. In 2001, distance learning for university students in Myanmar was reinforced by the provision of e-learning opportunities using electronic data broadcasting systems made available through satellite telecommunications. Without leaving their home towns, more than 300,000 students enrolled in courses offered by the University of Distance Education can now interact with professors at distance-learning centres nationwide in the course of their higher education studies.

The economic development potential of new information and communication technologies is enormous. However, the potential has yet to be harnessed fully for the benefit of the vast majority of people over the world. ICT have proved themselves capable of developing human capacity, creating and sharing knowledge, promoting health care, fighting infectious diseases, and fostering enterprises and entrepreneurship for sustainable development and reducing poverty around the world. The international community must make sure that this potential is fully

utilized for the benefit of the entire global community so that we can build a better world for the future.

Mr. Robles (Guatemala) (*spoke in Spanish*): We wish to speak in today's debate — associating ourselves with the statement made by the presidency of the Group of 77 and China — in order to present our country's perspective on the immensely important topic under consideration.

We have of late heard many opinions concerning the use of information and communication technologies for development. There is no denying that a tremendous digital divide separates developed and developing countries, and that disparities in access to digital technology exist also within countries. It also true, however, that information and communication technologies can bring about quantitative and qualitative advances, leading to very rapid progress that can help to bridge that divide.

We have likewise witnessed a profound change in telecommunications policies and regulations, and we have seen how continual technological advances have transformed the economy and people's lifestyles. For example, initiatives have been taken to increase transparency in public administration through technological modernization, and to streamline bureaucratic procedures through online services available to the public. This has been a source of concern for developing countries, which feel that they missed out on the industrial era but had hoped to be able to participate in the knowledge and information era.

This is reflected in developments that have occurred in my country. Indeed, some time ago the governmental telecommunications agency was privatized and relevant national legislation radically reformed. Thus our market now offers great opportunities, for it is deregulated and is governed by a simple and practical telecommunications law under which any company may provide the service that it is best suited to offer — the only requirement being that it register with the telecommunications authorities.

Some of the principal transnational corporations have already made large investments in the country, although those investments have been affected by the financial situation in which the sector finds itself worldwide. Nevertheless, the aggressive reform we have undertaken has already resulted in explosive growth in telecommunications services, as can be seen in the widespread use of cellular phones; the exponential increase in the number of Internet users; the constantly increasing use of informatics in the context of productive activities, particularly services; and the ever more widespread use of new technologies in urban centres and, in some cases, in rural areas.

Two facts relating to the narrowing of the digital divide are of special interest to the United Nations. The first is that the area we are dealing with is one that lends itself extraordinarily well to international cooperation. The second is that a great deal of cooperation will be required between public policy and civil society as a strategy to overcome the digital divide.

The issue of information and communication technologies for development should also be viewed from a broader perspective. On the one hand, they offer great potential for accelerating development, but, on the other, lack of development makes it impossible maximally to exploit them. For instance, in societies such as mine, the illiteracy rate remains high, with most young people failing to complete their basic education. Many people are still without basic services, and there is a great diversity of regional languages.

There are also cases in which students are more conversant with information and communication technologies than their teachers are. Thus the problem is not confined to the difficulty of learning the skills required to use the Internet, for instance. It extends to the difficulty of knowing how to use this source of information.

A further difficulty is the low purchasing power of people in developing countries. Affected as they are by the economic divide, day after day they must struggle to meet basic needs if they are to survive, and information and communication technologies do not have priority in their everyday lives. They cannot afford terminals, and, even if they do manage to overcome all of these obstacles, they will find that most of the available information is in languages they do not know.

Nevertheless, there are positive developments. With minimal technical assistance, cooperatives in the highlands of Guatemala, whose members usually have little or no formal education, are using information technologies to help market their products.

In the past, education was an important means for achieving development, but it has now become a fundamental factor in narrowing the digital divide and in making use of information technologies. Indeed, it is difficult to think of a way of narrowing that divide without considering ways and means of developing individual capacities. Though in many cases Governments have decided that telecommunications services are to be provided by the private sector, education is an area in which Governments must assume a leadership role, bringing into play all of their infrastructures to achieve comprehensive solutions, so that information and communication technologies can be used to the fullest possible advantage.

There is no denying that throughout history progress has given rise to needs that we did not know we had. Years ago, no one felt that a telephone had to be available at all times, and the same applies to automobiles and to television. We should never forget that progress and the development of the information society must serve the people, and that information must not be used to control people or invade their privacy.

We are aware of the challenge that all countries will be facing in future. We realize that many obstacles will have to be overcome, which will not be easy. There are also many risks. But we know also that this is an opportunity to achieve sustainable development, which will help us eradicate poverty. We have at hand a tool that, if properly used, can help us improve the quality of life of our citizens. Above all, the decisions and actions that we take will lead us to success or failure in the journey that we are making towards the information society.

Finally, we heartily welcome the prominence given this topic on the United Nations agenda. We believe that the efforts under way should continue — efforts which will culminate in the World Summit on the Information Society. We appeal to the General Assembly to keep this item on its agenda in order to advance international cooperation and development.

Mr. Stuart (Australia): I wish to congratulate you, Sir, on your country's latest triumph in the World Cup. It only goes to show how globalized telecommunications can span the digital divide. I should like to use this opportunity today to describe some of the practical steps which Australia has been taking to help narrow this digital divide.

The world has changed permanently as a result of the information revolution, and the pace of change will continue to accelerate. It is clear that this revolution provides enormous development opportunities. Reductions in production, distribution and transaction costs provide unprecedented opportunities for firms of all sizes to improve efficiency, compete more effectively and trade across borders. New forms of communication technology are ensuring that no corner of the world will be left untouched by globalization. The notion of a purely domestic market is becoming obsolete.

It is also clear, however, that there is a danger that the benefits of these new technologies could largely bypass many developing countries. With the greater opportunities to compete globally comes the need to be globally competitive, and greater demands are placed on firms in all countries to be global in terms of their communications, sourcing and selling capabilities.

Developing countries have great potential to compete successfully in the new global market, but risk being bypassed unless they embrace, and indeed are able to embrace, the information and communication technology revolution promptly and actively. What is needed is greater capacity so that these countries can take advantage of the opportunities.

The Internet creates new possibilities for developing linkages between people and between the developed and the developing worlds. But in order to bridge the digital divide, new technology must be harnessed and adapted to the needs of developing countries in their pursuit of poverty eradication. This echoes pretty much what we have been listening to in the debate in the last couple of days, including in the statements by the Group of 77 and many others.

What I would like to concentrate on is, as I said before, some of the practical ways in which Australia is trying to do something to help resolve this problem. Australia and the World Bank have recently embarked on an ambitious and major new international programme, which we call the Virtual Colombo Plan. This joint initiative addresses the causes of poverty through the use of information and communication technologies. Its major focus is to improve basic education and access to knowledge in developing countries through distance education and support for policy development using information and

communication technology. It also provides a new platform for education providers, research institutions and technology companies to share their knowledge and skills with our developing country partners.

Access to relevant development information, training opportunities for teachers and education managers and skill development for those formulating and implementing public policy are limited in many developing countries. While much progress has been made in terms of education access and achievements, pressures on education systems in developing countries remain great, especially at the basic education level. It is important to raise the percentage of children in school but it is not sufficient. The quality of education is also critical. Typically, poorer countries face significant constraints in the level of qualification of teachers, in the resources available to them and in the appropriateness in the teaching materials they can use.

At the post-secondary level, there is also great demand for access, including international training, and the provision of international and domestic training can itself be significantly facilitated, and at much lower cost, through using information and communication technology. So, support for improving education at the tertiary level is also urgently needed. There is a notable level of demand for specialized custom-designed short courses in many fields in both public sector and private sector institutions. These fields include law, operation of public utilities, audit, management, finance and human relations. In all of them, both in specific fields and in general, there are significant constraints to development in the lack of capacity in these areas. That is what the Virtual Colombo Plan is addressing.

ICT-based distance education and training is a fundamental component of the plan. In some cases, courses may be offered through distance learning centres, for example using video conferencing or computer or Internet facilities, and in others they will be offered to scholars located in areas of poverty that have very limited or no communications facilities. The challenge within the plan is to source appropriate modes of delivery for the various country and project requirements. Given that the existing focus of the Australian Government's development cooperation programme is already on poverty alleviation, it is natural that we should now try to find new approaches and innovations to ensure that our programme reaches beyond the traditional constraints.

Let me give some concrete examples of what the Virtual Colombo Plan has meant since it was launched in 2001. It has meant improving basic education in a number of developing countries — for example, in the Pacific island region in Fiji and Papua New Guinea — through both upgrading the skills of basic education teachers through distance education and improving government's capacity in this area. It has meant establishing a global distance learning network centre in China and assessing opportunities for establishing similar centres in other developing countries.

It has meant a programme of 200 virtual scholarships in financial year 2002-2003, undertaken in a range of countries. It has allowed Australia to join as a founding member of the Development Gateway Foundation, which we believe should become a premier means for the electronic exchange of information on development issues. We are considering establishing an Australian development gateway to make the development knowledge that we hold more easily accessible. It has also already developed and tendered projects to improve the capacity of the African Virtual University so that it can deliver quality relevant courses that address Africa's development needs.

The Virtual Colombo Plan will use the Internet to provide education to people in many developing countries. It will bring real benefits to children and to community groups in developing countries. We have committed $200 million over the next five years to support the Plan and the World Bank has also made a strong financial commitment to it. We hope that this example of donor partnership will serve as a catalyst for further funding from other countries.

I would like to make a few comments about the World Summit on the Information Society, which will be held in December 2003 in Geneva, and which will culminate in December 2005 in Tunisia. The Australian Government considers that the Summit will be an important forum to consider the themes of cross-border electronic commerce, the application of intellectual property rules, the standardization of electronic security and ensuring the free flow of information. The new technologies that have created the new information society have had an impact not only on the way that we do business, but also on how we relate to people of different languages and cultures. The growth of the Internet raises questions, however, about the balance between a completely unregulated flow of

information and restrictions in the interests of societal objectives. This new society bears risks such as from a tax on information infrastructure and the exposure of harmful content, for example to children.

In coming to terms with the information society, we need, as a global community, to carefully consider how to maximize its benefits, including through the removal of impediments to trade and the encouragement of balanced copyright regimes that encourage creativity, investment and innovation, while mitigating any downsides. We believe that the World Summit promises to be a constructive step on the road to understanding in this area.

Mr. Kim Chang Guk (Democratic People's Republic of Korea): Today information and communication technologies (ICT) are advancing at a speed that is beyond our imagination. The rapid advance of information and communication technologies has contributed to great achievements in economic, social and other areas, and tremendous change is being witnessed in human life. At the same time, information and communication technologies may bring about further marginalization of developing countries, causing the so-called digital divide, which we cannot overlook.

My delegation hopes that this meeting devoted to ICT for development — one of the important issues for international attention — will make a significant contribution to the preparatory process of the upcoming World Summit on the Information Society. With respect to this opportunity, my delegation also welcomes resolution 56/183 and resolutions and decisions adopted by the International Telecommunication Union, by the Economic and Social Council and by other relevant institutions and organs of the United Nations with respect to the World Summit on the Information Society to be held in 2003 and 2005. Likewise, my delegation appreciates the leading role played by the International Telecommunication Union in the preparation of the World Summit.

My delegation is of the view that ICT should not produce further marginalization of countries, but should benefit everyone and substantially contribute to achieving the international development goals and targets that are spelled out, inter alia, in the Millennium Declaration.

The World Summit on the Information Society not only should assess the development trends of countries and exchange experiences in the area of information and communication; it will also have to focus on fully engaging all countries, particularly developing countries, in the ICT field and on helping them make substantial social and economic progress by making the most of the advantages of ICT.

In order for ICT to be a genuine means of development, it is necessary to raise awareness of the information society and to ensure a favourable environment enabling the full application of ICT based on a sound infrastructure. Today, attention to ICT has, by and large, increased not only in developed countries but also in developing countries. However, developing countries have been challenged in their efforts to build their capacity and to introduce ICT extensively in the economic and social fields due to problems attributable to a lack of financing, technology and the necessary equipment.

Therefore, the roles of the International Telecommunication Union, of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and of other relevant bodies of the United Nations system need to be strengthened, giving priority to improving the capacity of developing countries in the field of ICT.

To that end, relevant United Nations bodies will have to constantly improve the structure of cooperation on ICT in keeping with the speed of advances in ICT worldwide and with today's realities. Financial resources such as the UNDP ICT Trust Fund should be encouraged and further strengthened, giving priority to developing countries in the allocation of funds. Fair cooperation should be extended, including the full dissemination of ICT and the transfer of ICT equipment. There are a considerable number of organs and bodies related to ICT in the United Nations system. However, they are deemed to be not adequately adapted to the reality of today's world of information technology, and the transfer of advanced ICT to developing countries still faces various obstacles. Unless such obstacles are removed, ICT may be monopolized by some countries and cannot be a genuine means of development for all. Expert-level human resources training and the strengthening of international exchanges and cooperation are also of importance in the field of ICT for development. Particular attention needs to be given to the training of ICT experts in developing countries and to encouraging

seminars, workshops and training programmes at the regional and international levels.

Under the wise leadership of the great leader General Kim Jong Il, who has foreseen that the twenty-first century will be the era of the information industry, strenuous efforts are being made for the development of ICT in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea considers the development of ICT to be one of its most important fields and, based on a properly-designed ICT development plan, is striving to increase ICT investment and to fully introduce ICT in all areas of the national economy.

The Government has taken measures to expand and to modernize information and communication infrastructure in every region of the country, in accordance with the rapid evolution of ICT; to add or to enhance ICT research centres and teaching faculties in various educational and academic institutions; and to enhance the education of talented students in computer-related techniques and to produce numbers of technical experts commensurate with the development of ICT, thus drawing the attention of the entire nation.

In order to become familiar with international trends in ICT and to strengthen exchanges with other countries in the field, my Government has organized various scientific seminars and exhibitions on ICT and will host an international forum and exhibition on contemporary ICT in Pyongyang on 28 and 29 June 2002.

My delegation hopes that the preparatory session to be held in Geneva in July will make a good start on preparations for the World Summit on the Information Society and that satisfactory overall results will be achieved in the preparatory process of the Summit. My delegation will be fully engaged in the preparatory process and will strive to ensure that the World Summit on the Information Society will impart real impetus to development in the twenty-first century.

Mr. Bhattarai (Nepal): Mr. President, permit me to begin by congratulating you on the wise and timely initiative of the Assembly to reflect collectively on issues concerning information and communication technologies (ICT) for development; I am honoured to participate today.

Coming after the Economic and Social Council's thematic deliberations on ICT in 2000 and its later establishment of the ICT Task Force, the present meeting will go a long way in bringing the gift of ICT closer to the billions of people who are still outside its virtuous reach. My delegation is encouraged by the enthusiasm generated, both within the United Nations system and outside, in response to resolution 56/183. It is crucial that the United Nations take an active role in forging global ways and means to ensure that the digital revolution also help overcome the digital divide.

Yesterday, the Assembly heard the collective voice of the developing countries. Nepal fully subscribes to the statement made on behalf of the Group of 77.

The potential of ICT to create wealth and job opportunities, to promote health and education and to eradicate poverty make it one of the most useful tools for realizing the Millennium Development Goals. The question is now how we direct and channel the unprecedented power of ICT towards facilitating the economic development and social progress of humanity.

With the ICT revolution as its engine, the wave of globalization has already touched every aspect of modern life. Yet, millions of people have never heard a dial tone. Clearly, the impact of ICT at present is mixed at best. On the one hand, superlative innovation has tremendously enriched the stock of knowledge and the means to make a difference for all. On the other, it has further widened the already macabre digital divide between rich and poor, between cities and villages, between men and women and, above all, between nations. An open exchange of views and commitments is urgently needed to help strengthen our resolve in addressing the digital divide in a more fruitful manner. Debate on the structural aspect of a global ICT scheme may also be necessary to address the roots of our difficulties with the present system.

The benefits of ICT are contingent on their accessibility, which is heavily skewed to the disadvantage of the poor countries. Most of those countries are so poor that they cannot afford on their own to introduce ICT on a full scale. Even when they do — as some have tried — their inability to keep their technology up to date with the striking pace of innovation renders the technology they have acquired obsolete in almost no time, thus incurring huge disadvantages instead. In the process, those countries are very often shown the bright face of ICT

advancement and, once hooked, are beaten to the ground by its commodity character. The question of the choice of technology increasingly adds to the dilemma.

On the whole, a just and equitable global ICT system is perhaps the only way to fashion a durable remedy to these dilemmas. Such a system would also be conducive to raising investment in the economic and social infrastructure in developing countries to meet the needs of their burgeoning information society. For that, we must be prepared to make a radical departure from the way ICT know-how and assets are managed and distributed around the globe today.

More urgently, however, we must find ways to address the concerns of poor countries to help them join the global mainstream. We must respond to the desperate need for concerted efforts to utilize the benefits of ICT advances for development with short-, medium- and long-term strategies. That is where genuine partnerships, South-South cooperation and regional and global synergies to build on a coherent strategy are required most.

In that context, Nepal welcomes the proposal to hold the World Summit on the Information Society in two phases, in 2003 and 2005. The Economic and Social Council, the United Nations ICT Task Force and the Group of Eight's Digital Opportunity Task Force, which have emerged as promising forces for the delivery of effective results in reducing the digital gap and in promoting ICT for all, have an even larger role to play. We call upon them and upon all other actors that have the ability to contribute positively to this process to come forward and to help build momentum in favour of ICT for the development of all.

We believe that the World Summit on the Information Society can be instrumental in addressing the gamut of ICT issues to ensure, without delay, digital opportunity for all in the realm of global and regional cooperation. We also believe that developing countries' need for digital opportunity, and the obstacles to ensuring that they have it, will attract sufficient attention at the Summit. As always, it is our hope that support will be forthcoming for the least developed countries to prepare themselves for the Summit.

I hasten to add that the private sector has been the driving force behind the incredible pace of ICT development. Since its active support and participation will be critical to ensuring the success both of ICT advancement and of the Summit itself, the participation of the private sector, and that of academic and research institutions from developing countries, in the World Summit on the Information Society will be essential.

Despite Nepal's strong enthusiasm for promoting scientific knowledge for development and for accelerating the pace of its social and economic progress, my country began its journey on the road to the ICT sector fairly recently. The first e-mail service was introduced in 1994, followed by the creation of a separate Ministry of Science and Technology in 1996. The introduction of three private-sector Internet service providers the same year opened a new vista for the sector and acted as a stepping stone for the integration, albeit limited, of Nepal into the global knowledge-based society.

More recently, the country has focused its attention on expediting the process, particularly in the area of ICT. A policy and institutional framework has been put in place for the advancement of the sector. The enactment of the Telecommunication Act of 1997, and through it the establishment of the Telecommunication Authority, has provided the impetus for ICT development in Nepal. While a telecommunication corporation is responsible for ICT-related service delivery in the field, the Telecommunication Authority ensures overall supervision and policy coordination at the national level.

The Government has also introduced very small aperture terminal (V-SAT) technology for data transmission, followed by mobile/wireless local telephone services in the private sector. The private sector's growing engagement has resulted in a better quality of service, lower Internet access charges and an increased number of e-mail and Internet users in Nepal. Two years after the introduction of Internet service providers to the country, the number of e-mail accounts exceeds 5,000 and that of Internet accounts exceeds 10,000. Realizing the tremendous opportunity that ICT provides, His Majesty's Government formulated its information technology policy in 2000, opening prospects for e-strategy, e-commerce, e-governance, e-education and other e-opportunities.

At the national level, the Government is working to promote, facilitate and regulate information technology (IT) development. Incentives have been offered for foreign and domestic investment. The

Government also plans to establish an information superhighway to keep itself abreast of the fast-changing trends in the IT sector. In addition, the process for establishing an IT park has been initiated.

More recently, the Government formed a National IT Development Council, headed by the Prime Minister, and an IT Development Committee began working under the chairmanship of the Minister of Science and Technology for expeditious implementation of the Government's policy. The establishment of a venture capital fund and the enactment of a cyber law are also under way. Nevertheless, the present level of 11 Internet service providers, which are providing Internet service for more than 40,000 users, is far from satisfactory when compared with the country's needs and potential. Also, the private sector is in need of international partnerships to build and sustain confidence in its capacity to develop an ICT infrastructure at the local level.

The developing countries are trying to follow the trend of global ICT development, though they need to do more work and to acquire more resources and more capability to keep pace with the fast-changing world of information technology. The United Nations high-level panel on ICT and the Digital Opportunity Task Force were able to identify the basic problems of the digital divide and to recommend remedies. Global support for an IT policy to improve connectivity, to build human capacity and to promote and develop e-commerce and an e-network is the core element for utilizing ICT for development.

A comprehensive plan comprising the training of an economically active population and the parallel establishment of a cyber-education system at schools and colleges needs to be implemented. My delegation sincerely hopes that this meeting and the forthcoming Summit will address such crucial issues in a holistic manner to yield concrete and coherent results in terms of improved accessibility, enhanced human capability and greater utilization of ICT in the development of the neediest sectors of our countries and societies.

In conclusion, I wish to emphasize that developing countries have the potential to contribute to the promotion of ICT and to apply ICT to their development. Nepal believes that a serious international approach, as well as sincere and sustained external support, will have catalytic effects in making a difference in developing countries, both for the development of ICT and for its utilization in development. We believe that, if we take this event as a concrete starting point in the process of preventing the widening of the gulf, of bridging the existing gap and of enabling countries such as mine to get a good start in the process, it will not be long before we can revolutionalize the pace of development, with ICT as its lifeblood.

Mr. Bennouna (Morocco) (*spoke in French*): At the outset, the delegation of Morocco would like to thank you, Mr. President, for having initiated this process of discussion on information and communication technologies (ICT). You planned it in the initial programme of your presidency, and I must say that the debate yesterday and today has been timely, coming at a time when the international community, the United Nations and the private sector have finally become aware of the importance of ICT as the principal vehicle of development, as President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal again reminded us yesterday.

The Moroccan population — as perhaps some are not aware — are very open and receptive to ICT. That is why the Moroccan Government, to stimulate this movement, recently opened a technology park in Casablanca, designed to provide outreach to all the new Moroccan start-up companies in order to help them get under way and to participate in development. The Casablanca technology park — if we are to believe the media — is becoming one of the most successful in Africa.

Although this debate is a recent one, and one that is taking on increasing importance with the burgeoning of the Internet, it is nevertheless necessary to recall that this discussion is an old one as far as the transfer of technology is concerned. The debate goes on, despite the fact that until now no concrete results have been achieved in this area. This is why in today's discussions — and in the future — we must be mindful of the fact that for the developing countries, it is not simply a question of ICT but also one of new technologies in general in their global dimension.

The world of globalization which we are living in today has surely been characterized by profound changes that have stemmed from scientific and technological development based on a revolution in ICT. This revolution presents a challenge, but it is also

an opportunity to be grasped for all the developing countries, precisely because of the importance of these technologies and the opportunities provided by them to speed up access to information and to be in step with what is happening in the more advanced world. This is why we have said that these technologies have been a source of comparative advantage and that we should exploit them for development.

Of course, digital technologies are not a panacea for all problems, but they can contribute to creating a climate conducive to foreign investment. Also, they make it possible to create jobs, and they provide important prospects for growth and exports. They are also a tool with a multiplier effect and can facilitate reduction in cost and improvement in the quality of goods and services.

As far as education is concerned, we have frequently heard it said here that there can be no doubt that ICT will make it possible to develop literacy, to make it possible for everyone to have access to knowledge, possibly to combat pandemics and even to promote traditional cultures and identities.

It is accepted that ICT can contribute to a country's political development and improve the management of public affairs by making it easier for citizens to participate in political life and to follow, and even to monitor, the behaviour of elected officials. Consequently, this can be a very positive factor in democratization. Technology can also make it possible to bring local structures closer to the central authorities.

But, unfortunately, as we are all aware — and this is also the purpose of this Meeting — most countries, if not the vast majority of them, have not been able to benefit from these technologies up until now, and most of these countries experience difficulties in getting access to it. The disparity in development levels, of course, is one factor that has accentuated what is now called the digital divide, which has unfortunately grown wider and which may have irreversible consequences if solutions to it are not provided as quickly as possible. It is for this reason that we would like to thank Korea for this initiative. We are very pleased at the prospect of the Summits to be held next year and in the year 2005.

Obviously, the African continent is one of the most affected in this connection, with the most problems, where the rate of ICT penetration among the public at large unfortunately is very low and may further impede Africa's development. According to the United Nations Development Programme, the entire African continent has only 1,300,000 subscribers with direct Internet access. Of these, 250,000 are located in North Africa and 750,000 in South Africa. This leaves barely 300,000, a very small number, for the rest of the continent. Likewise, the total number of Internet users is approximately 4 million people and would be only 1.5 million if we excluded South Africa from that count.

The weakness of infrastructures is undoubtedly one of the reasons for this lag. In 1999, the African continent had only 18 million telephone lines, and only 17 countries of the some 50 that exist had Internet access in towns and urban centres.

Something has to be done to remedy this situation. We must try to correct these imbalances, and the international community must give some thought as to what measures must be taken to meet this challenge of the twenty-first century.

For this, the United Nations must support the developing countries, first to plot out their own national strategies, drawing, of course, on what has been done elsewhere. Likewise, these countries have to be helped, because the private sector cannot on its own set up the necessary infrastructures for ICT. Similarly, we have to tackle the essential question of financing all these projects and programmes. I have just referred to infrastructures and to programmes to draw up national strategies. The recent Monterrey Conference has already considered this matter. National resources must be mobilized, but at the same time we have to pay attention to the debt burden, how to increase official development assistance, how to encourage foreign investment and, finally, how to enable developing countries, particularly the African ones, to have more natural access to developed markets.

Cooperation in the United Nations has a central part to play in all this to make it possible for the public at large to have access to these major information and communication technologies. Therefore, the United Nations must support the developing countries, particularly the least developed ones, in their efforts so that they are not completely marginalized and left by the wayside in today's world. The United Nations is called on to play a leadership role in this area. There is no alternative for coordinating all the activities of

specialized agencies and international organizations that deal with ICT.

We welcome the creation at the beginning of the year of the Information and Communication Technologies Task Force. I believe that the Task Force is doing useful work; it should be encouraged to persevere and to elaborate United Nations guidelines in this area.

Mr. Balzan (Malta), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The private sector plays an indispensable role in developing and disseminating such technologies, but government policies should stay in step with what is being done in the private sector. As I pointed out earlier in relation to Morocco, Governments have a part to play in providing incentives to facilitate technology transfer to developing countries. Such technologies carry the hope that the modern world, with its various cultures and civilizations, can be made accessible. They are therefore an essential factor in what today is being called the dialogue between cultures, and they might also be useful in helping to combat extremism.

There could be also, however, a danger that they might lead to social imbalance in the countries involved. That is why we must have a global approach that takes into account the sociocultural aspects of the transfer of ICT. Although such technologies might make possible advances, they could also produce an imbalance in traditional societies. We must therefore develop certain ethical principles in order to avoid the kind of dysfunctional relationships that might evolve within the information society. This is something that UNESCO is working on, and there must be coordination with UNESCO in this respect.

In conclusion, it is our earnest hope, as we have said in earlier meetings, that the Summit on the Information Society, scheduled to begin at Geneva in 2003 and to continue at Tunis in 2005, will be very helpful. I believe that it will provide us with excellent prospects for the next three years. We must ensure that the summit meetings are successful and that they become a point of departure for a new era in which no one is excluded from or left behind in the world that we are creating. This will depend on our efforts; it will depend on serious preparations for the Geneva Summit.

Mr. Chowdhury (Bangladesh): At the Millennium Summit our leaders pledged to free the world from poverty and underdevelopment. They committed themselves to ensuring that the benefits of information and communication technologies (ICT) are made available to all. Indeed, that was not the first time such a commitment was entered into. Five decades earlier, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights underscored the right of nations to share in scientific advances. Yet two thirds of humankind are excluded from the opportunities of the digital revolution. The vast majority of people remain untouched by this miracle. Without immediate steps to bridge the digital divide, developing countries will be further marginalized within the global society. This is not just a fear — it is a fact.

Revolutionary advances in information technology are transforming the economic and social matrix of the world. This is changing the way we work and the way we live. It is pervading almost all human activities; it is breaking barriers to knowledge; and it is expanding participation. We have high hopes that this new technology will lead to healthier lives, greater social freedoms, increased knowledge and more productive livelihoods.

The ICT revolution, intertwined with globalization, has created the network age. This has enhanced possibilities and increased socio-economic rewards for the entire world. To benefit from this, every country needs the capacity to understand and adapt global technologies to local needs. National policies alone will not suffice. We therefore stress the need for international initiatives, as well as for the fair use of global rules to harness the resultant opportunities.

Technological development is a critical determinant of economic growth. It is an essential component of sustainable development in today's knowledge-based global economy. Unfortunately, such know-how is still concentrated in a few countries. Indeed, it remains confined to a few firms. This monopoly over technology acquisition also leads to control over the pricing of products and services and places developing countries at a greater disadvantage.

Our objective is to establish a democratic and inclusive information society. We aim to promote digital opportunity in the developing world. We intend to apply it in areas like e-government, e-commerce, health services, distance education and human resource development. Information technology has the potential

to empower civil society, buttress democratic institutions, strengthen the pluralist ethos and make Governments more efficient, transparent and accountable.

We know that bridging the digital divide will require concerted measures from a whole range of actors. In our view, a consensus on strategic priorities and commitment by the various stakeholders are essential to confront this challenge. Governments, the private sector, civil society, local communities, international organizations and donors all have a role to play in creating a favourable digital environment. New information technology has enormous potential for the promotion of economic and social development, once basic conditions are in place.

The experience of Bangladesh shows how this technology can be effectively applied. It extends even to regions in the country that lack power and other infrastructure. The challenge is to design it for the right job. The Grameen phone programme is a unique case in point. It has connected some 10,000 villages in Bangladesh, all of which were previously without telephones. This innovative use of cellular technology replaces the more expensive and time-consuming ways of collecting information. It now enables more than 15 million people in rural areas to relate to the outside world. It allows them to receive information on market prices, on health-care services, on job opportunities and even on how their relatives are faring. In short, it has vastly improved their quality of life.

Bangladesh intends to harness the benefits of ICT for further socio-economic development. It is formulating a national policy for the development of this sector. The policy aims at developing an efficient information technology infrastructure and a large pool of professionals to meet the needs of local and global markets.

Steps have already been undertaken to modernize the telecommunications sector, the backbone of information technology infrastructure. We encourage donor agencies, non-governmental organizations and other development partners to help in the necessary capacity-building. We believe that we are taking the right steps and going in the right direction. This positive trend inside the country has to be matched by international cooperation. We are hopeful that Bangladesh will serve as a software development area — a miniature Silicon Valley — if the plans can be successfully implemented.

Today Bangladesh is in the midst of a massive societal transformation fired by such innovative home-grown ideas as micro-credit and non-formal education. We have begun successfully to tap our own intellectual resources, and the information technology revolution will assist this process. Women are being increasingly associated with this. We believe it will help mainstream gender, a priority social objective in Bangladesh. The resultant social benefits will be enormous, which will assist us in our quest for modernization.

We are happy that the role of information technologies in the new century is high on the agenda of the United Nations. We welcome the establishment of the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force, comprising Governments, multilateral development institutions, private industry and foundations. The Task Force, in coordination and partnership with other forums such as the G-8 Digital Opportunity Task Force, the SoftBank emerging market, the Global Knowledge Partnership and others can provide overall leadership. It can help devise a strategy for future global information technology development. Such positive cooperation will enable many developing countries to leapfrog stages of development. The blessings of information technology can indeed be legion.

The upcoming World Summit on the Information Society must address the issue of the digital divide in the context of globalization and development. It must deliberate on the broadest range of questions concerning information. It must arrive at a common vision and understanding to ensure an effective and equitable global information society. It must help promote coherence and synergies between regional and international ICT initiatives. Ways must be found to aid developing countries to seize the opportunity. Only then will the purpose of the Summit — to build a truly global network age — have been achieved, and humanity will have marched together, to the same drummer, into the twenty-first century.

Moments ago, in the Economic and Social Council Chamber, Harry Belafonte said:

> "The world still breeds life and hope, and much of it is owed to the United Nations."

The success of the United Nations in inspiring the information technology revolution would further invigorate that life and fuel that hope.

Mrs. Loemban Tobing-Klein (Suriname): May I add my voice to those that have already, in the course of this debate, expressed words of praise and admiration for the President's excellent leadership and initiative in organizing this timely and significant meeting. My delegation wishes also to associate itself with the statement delivered by Mr. Rudolf Römer, Vice-Minister for Science and Technology of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, in which the information and communication technologies (ICT) revolution quite rightly was recognized as an effective instrument in the areas of economic growth, knowledge, education at all levels, eradication of poverty, empowerment of people, capacity-building, decision-making and promotion of sustainable development.

The Secretary-General should also be commended for his timely initiative, within the United Nations system, to create the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force, which is playing a vital role in the preparatory process for the World Summit on the Information Society, to be held in December 2003 in Geneva and in 2005 in Tunis.

In December 1994, while I was carrying out my duties during my first assignment at the Mission of the Republic of Suriname to the United Nations, my two sons, who are ICT specialists, insisted that they would teach me how to make use of computers and their information and communication capacities.

Since then, my world and the world around me has changed drastically. I must confess that it would not have been possible for me properly to fulfil my duties and responsibilities as a representative of my country without the use of e-mail, the Internet, ICQ Chat, Webcast, videoconferences, and so on. I have discovered since then that I would have been underdeveloped — and I mean it — as a human being had I not followed the wise advice and lessons of my sons.

The importance of its ability to have access to the entire world, to visit world libraries, to meet, and to discuss and negotiate, via the electronic highway, the most complicated subjects has strengthened my conviction that the time has come for those responsible for the development of peoples and nations to create and realize a global ICT system. Such a system must give the necessary ICT access, knowledge and tools to every human being and to every country, large or small, developed or developing, least developed or landlocked, in order to — as the representative of the Group of 77 and China said earlier — immediately, in an effective and innovative way, address the growing digital divide, which can become wider with every passing day.

Information and communication technologies must be considered as essential for the sustainable development of peoples and societies, as we have accepted that development cannot take place if humankind is not provided with adequate food, housing, safe drinking water, education and health care. The rights-based approach to development has been universally adopted, and that approach should also include the right to information and communication technologies.

My delegation is grateful to, and would like to thank, the Secretary-General and the President of the General Assembly for the background documents, and especially for the report of the Economic and Social Council for 2001, which contains important information in chapter V — Coordination segment — on the role of the United Nations in promoting development, particularly with respect to access to, and transfer of, knowledge and technology, especially information and communication technologies, inter alia, through partnership with relevant stakeholders, including the private sector.

My mission has been greatly helped by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in creating e-mail addresses, home page possibilities and training facilities for all States Members of the United Nations since 1995, and we wish to thank it for its efforts.

I would note here that the question of universal and equitable access to ICT and to education are especially important for our countries.

My delegation welcomes the Thematic Trust Fund established by UNDP as a flexible instrument to strengthen UNDP's response to requests for assistance from countries. My delegation is very interested in the Global Cooperation Framework (GCF) and in the services provided to Governments, civil society and country teams for the implementation of ICT programmes in their respective countries.

The $5 million contribution from the Government of Japan, which has been made available for UNDP's first Thematic Trust Fund for Information and Communication Technology for Development, launched by Mr. Mark Malloch Brown, Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme in Tokyo, on 31 October 2001, has given rise to important possibilities for our countries. As Mr. Malloch Brown stated on that occasion: "ICT provides powerful tools and can serve as a critical enabler to achieve many of the development goals agreed to by world leaders at the United Nations Millennium Summit."

Since no more than 10 per cent of all ICT and Internet users live in the developing countries, it is most urgent that we immediately begin to bridge the digital divide with ICT projects in those countries aimed at addressing the most urgent needs in the fields of poverty eradication, education, capacity-building and, in general, mainstreaming ICT into the development agenda, as a number of delegations have suggested.

UNDP's Digital Opportunity Initiative, a public-private partnership, and the Group of Eight (G-8) Digital Opportunity Task Force, aimed at addressing the digital divide — the latter launched with the support of the Japanese Government at the G-8 summit and approved by the G-8 leaders last year — are very promising, especially in the interest of the poorest and most marginalized groups. Also important is the fact that UNDP and the World Bank are co-hosting the Task Force secretariat.

On 30 October 1995, the Republic of Suriname entered the global information highway with a short statement by President Ronald Venetiaan, who, as President of Suriname, invites all Internet users to enter the homepage of Suriname on the Internet at www.sr.net. Various civil society organizations and the University of Suriname are developing programmes focused on creating the necessary infrastructure and ICT networks. Various donors — among others, the International Development Bank, the Organization of American States, Belgium and the Netherlands — are supporting existing initiatives. Successful projects are the computer training centre for older persons and computer education programmes for schools and other education centres. Suriname, however, needs the tools and the support to develop a project for the entire country, including the interior and other districts, for which distance learning should be developed.

On various occasions at international forums, the President and the Minister for Foreign Affairs have also requested special attention for the widening digital divide and have spoken of the necessity to create digital opportunities for all.

The possibilities described during this important meeting by representatives of various Governments such as the Government of Japan, the Republic of Korea, Canada and, this morning, the Government of Australia with the Virtual Colombo Plan — as well as by representatives of the private sector, among others, during the breakfast discussions this morning under the capable leadership of the Chairman of the Working Group on Informatics, the Permanent Representative of Kenya — are very promising. My delegation looks forward to a constructive dialogue regarding possible support.

The Government of Suriname intends to participate in the upcoming regional ICT conference in Uruguay, to be held from 17 to 21 July, on the theme of ICT and poverty, and it will be grateful for follow-up of the discussions in that regard.

The preparatory process of the upcoming World Summit on the Information Society and the Summit itself can and must make the badly needed difference with regard to information and communication technology for all.

Mr. Pongwane (South Africa): It is indeed a great honour for me to represent the Government of the Republic of South Africa at this meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies (ICT) for development. My delegation fully associates itself with the statement of the Group of 77 and China.

ICT is a key priority programme of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), and South Africa's President, Thabo Mbeki, has given strong support to strategies that enable communities to leapfrog into the age of the information society.

It was indeed heartening for us that, at the end of May, in a global partnership programme begun in 1998 in Senegal, a submarine cable around the west coast of Africa was completed, facilitating inter-African traffic. This has enhanced what NEPAD seeks to achieve. It is ironic, though, that the cable covers the west coast of Africa and southern Africa, leaving what the United Nations has recognized as the least developed countries

of our continent — the east coast of Africa — with very little infrastructure. We will need to create mechanisms to develop infrastructure in that vast area.

Inside South Africa, the President has established two important vehicles that attempt to formulate action plans and strategies for South Africa to bridge the digital divide. One of these is the Presidential National Commission on Information Society and Development, which is composed of South African and other African experts. The other is the Presidential International Advisory Council on Information Society and Development, which is composed of chief executive officers of major companies around the world. At the heart of those commissions is the fact that ICT is an important tool and an enabler for social development in Africa and, in particular, for South Africa. ICT cuts across all areas of development, such as e-agriculture; e-health; e-education; e-commerce; e-government and e-democracy.

Technological innovation and ICT are about social development and eradication of poverty. Many countries have their success stories to tell about the benefits and the use of information and communication technologies for human development. The utility of technological innovation in economic growth and improvement in the quality of life is beyond question. This is exemplified in technology growth hubs that bring about industry-academic collaboration, as seen in places such as Silicon Valley in the United States and Bangalore in India and in emerging areas such as El Ghazala in Tunisia, which are linked to development networks.

In South Africa too we have a story to tell with respect to small and medium-sized enterprises and the empowerment of local communities. The Government has recently formulated policies that ensure that in areas where teledensity is less than 5 per cent we are able to license small, medium and micro-enterprises to provide telecommunications services. In the last few years, there has been an unbelievable growth of kiosks and phone shops in previously disadvantaged communities of our country. Just recently, at the end of May, we issued an invitation for a second network operator to apply, and we have licensed centres to provide multimedia services in South Africa.

Governmental departments, the private sector and non-profit organizations have joined hands in the establishment and rollout of multipurpose community centres in rural communities. That successful partnership is a shining example of how ICT can be used to assist rural communities in bridging the digital divide.

The South African Council for Industrial and Scientific Research has established three centres in the North-West province of South Africa that are successfully implementing a project called ICT for Rural Development. One of its technical objectives is to create a regional intranet that will connect each of those sites with the Centre of Excellence in Mafekeng. The intranet will demonstrate how ICT can integrate remote rural communities into a network whereby centrally based information can be distributed to them. The project is intended to provide a communication platform for the delivery of local content, government and private-sector information services and health and education applications.

Another important undertaking is the Lubisi project. Community-driven and high-impact, it is an integral project employing a wide range of technologies to provide infrastructure and job creation opportunities. Through it, the people of 23 villages in the Lubisi area of the Eastern Cape province of the Republic of South Africa have been linked together. Its goals are the installation of an appropriate information and communications infrastructure; the packaging of information in support of rural development initiatives; the presentation of information in various delivery platforms; skills transfer and training; and the development of models for replication in other areas, including the Southern African Development Community region and other parts of Africa.

This year, our President instructed the Government to hasten the establishment of an ICT university in South Africa that will facilitate the development of human capital in South Africa and in the rest of the continent. We have taken measures to strengthen the Universal Service Agency and to increase its resources in order to ensure that we use ICT for the social development of our communities.

South Africa's Post Office has an extensive infrastructure of approximately 2,500 locations that is being increased to some 3,700 locations throughout the country. We are rolling out public information terminals, which will facilitate people's access to government information and to the Internet. A bill currently before Parliament addressing

e-communication and e-transactions would designate the Post Office a preferred authentication service provider for e-commerce by virtue of its infrastructure.

We have increased the rollout of community radio stations, the restructuring of public broadcasting and the expansion of the digital broadcasting infrastructure in South Africa. We have developed a plan to ensure universal Internet service, beginning with the development of a national address system, and we have stated that every child over 5 years old should have an e-mail address within the next seven years. We recognize that the key for using ICT for development is ensuring the existence of the necessary infrastructure backbone.

We wish to underscore the importance of the forthcoming World Summit on the Information Society, and we should like to take this opportunity to thank the host countries, Switzerland and Tunisia. We look forward to engaging with all participants during the preparations for that event. We trust that we will create the conditions for a World Summit that will build a truly universal and inclusive global information society in which there is a realistic chance for a better life for all. Recent initiatives and events in various parts of the world over the past year aimed at bridging the digital divide should serve as a reminder of our common responsibility to humanity and our duty to improve the lives of the world's people through ICT.

Mr. Kasemsarn (Thailand): My delegation wishes to express its sincere appreciation to the President for this timely meeting on information and communication technologies (ICT) for development, which we hope will contribute to our efforts to bridge the digital divide and to maximize the use of ICT in developing countries. In that regard, we wish to thank the President of Senegal for his presence and for his thoughtful and constructive remarks yesterday. The Thai delegation also wishes to associate itself with the statement made by the representative of Venezuela on behalf of the Group of 77 and China.

Thailand attaches great importance to ICT as an essential tool for poverty eradication and for the achievement of sustainable development. ICT development in developing countries, such as Thailand, poses a great challenge. Are we equal to its demands, or is ICT too difficult and too expensive for us to cope with? One main reason for that challenge is that the convergence of computer and communication has transformed many countries into knowledge-based societies, where knowledge and good education are no longer optional. Some developing countries, on the other hand, are still being left behind because they are unable to invest in telecommunications infrastructure, in information technology (IT) equipment and in technical personnel. The digital divide will continue to widen unless government leaders commit themselves to a serious ICT development plan.

Thailand's development vision for the next 20 years focuses on eradicating poverty and on enhancing the Thai people's quality of life. The Thai Government considers ICT to be a major infrastructure for spreading information and for improving citizens' quality of access to it. Policies and programmes supporting ICT infrastructure development — such as the IT 2000 policy, the national IT policy framework for the next decade and the Government IT services project — have been formulated to accomplish that objective.

To address the problem of the digital divide, my Government has considered five key measures to narrow the digital divide and to create digital opportunities as one of the strategies in the country's ICT development. The first measure draws on the creation of information, or content, within the country in the Thai language. Content has come to be recognized as perhaps even more important than access as the tremendous impact of information technology on every aspect of society has become more apparent. In developing countries, IT's potential to benefit everyone will never be realized without the existence of useful and relevant content for all population groups.

The second measure is to increase the availability of low-cost personal computers. This project will enable people to buy personal computers and the associated open-source software at an affordable price, which will result in increased IT use.

The third measure is to broaden local telephone service, focusing on rural areas where the market situation is not attractive for private-sector investment.

The fourth measure is to establish telecentres in remote areas to overcome the high cost of IT equipment through the use of shared facilities in villages. The telecentre is designed to be a telecommunications centre for people in that community, enabling them to use telecommunications equipment to communicate and to distribute and

exchange information between the community and the outside world.

The fifth measure is the development of a machine translation service from English into Thai, and vice versa. The machine will assist users in accessing the information they want.

The obligation to support an equitable national information infrastructure (NII) is clearly stated in section 78 of Thailand's current Constitution. An NII act is being drafted in order to ensure our readiness to move into a networked society. In addition to the legal infrastructure, a ministry is being set up proactively to coordinate the country's ICT development.

It is believed that, with the implementation of the five priority initiatives I have just mentioned, the digital divide in Thailand will be reduced and digital opportunities simultaneously built up in the process of upgrading the quality of life of the people.

ICT has a very crucial role in sustainable development and in the achievement of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. My delegation thus believes that the efforts of the developing countries to bridge the digital divide and to develop the use of ICT in their development should be met with international cooperation and support. In this connection, at the Fourth Asia-Europe Foreign Ministers' Meeting (ASEM), held at Madrid from 6 to 7 June this year, the Thai Foreign Minister proposed, inter alia, the creation of an ICT Performance Reference Forum and an ASEM e-education hub.

Furthermore, we must also bring together all relevant stakeholders at both the national and international levels, and involve especially the private sector. To this end, the United Nations has a unique and pertinent role to play. The launching of the United Nations ICT Task Force in November 2001 was therefore timely. The Task Force should, among other things, promote the international commitment to mainstream ICT in development assistance programmes and help mobilize the resources needed.

My delegation also welcomes the contribution made by the G-8 DOT Force, set up at the Okinawa Summit, and the Genoa Plan of Action, with nine priority areas, as a basis for developing countries to achieve sustainable ICT-enabled development, in both the economic and social areas. The work of the United Nations ICT Task Force and the G-8 DOT Force should reinforce and complement each other.

In closing, my delegation believes that our two-day deliberations will significantly contribute to the preparatory meetings for the World Summit on the Information Society, to be convened in 2003 in Switzerland and in 2005 in Tunisia. We believe that the Summit will provide another avenue for world leaders to renew their commitment to help bridge the digital divide and further to utilize ICT to achieve sustainable development and the Millennium Development Goals.

Mr. Gyorkos (Slovenia): It is a great honour for the country I am representing, and for me personally, actively to participate in this Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies (ICT).

General Assembly resolution 56/258 lists all relevant issues related to, and all possible consequences of, ICT for development. It is crucial to recognize not only the determinants that are critical for creating a global knowledge-based economy, but also the fact that the information and communication technology revolution poses both opportunities and challenges.

Slovenia is going through a period of intensive ICT deployment, and the initial effects of that deployment are being felt on society at large and on the economy. The resulting challenges are tremendous, because our economy is still in transition, and we are working to achieve the goals involved in the process of European integration. Slovenia is determined to play an active and cooperative role at both the regional and global levels, because we believe that the concept of an information society is of the utmost importance.

I should like to emphasize that the experience gained during the process of recognition and adoption of the so-called information society culture in countries that are candidates for European Union membership should be shared with other parts of the developing world. Exchanges of views on policy issues, best practices and benchmarking results all can contribute to the global knowledge base on information and communication technologies as a driving force of development.

The first progress report published this month on the occasion of the European Ministerial Conference on "Information Society — Connecting Europe", held

in Ljubljana, Slovenia, shows significant differences between the candidate countries. The progress report also indicates that there are diverse opportunities for sharing experiences and for cooperative and complementary actions that can be taken by participating countries.

It is a given that information and communication technologies offer development opportunities. Market forces and the activities of the private sector are fundamental but not the only imperative in terms of the development of an information society. Partnerships with Governments and the involvement of civil society are needed.

With the deployment of ICT, we are faced with two contrasting phenomena: first, a national economy stimulant; and secondly, a growing digital divide, both within countries and globally. Existing social differences are exacerbated when only one sector of the population is capable of using digital technologies. The gap cannot be reduced through the creation of an affordable infrastructure and education alone; it also requires the development of user-centred e-services. Governments, multilateral development institutions and donors play an important role in contributing to the achievement of a development strategy based on inclusiveness and participation.

The unpleasant recognition of a digital divide within each and every country should contribute to even deeper worldwide concern and to a stronger determination to address this issue very seriously and to agree on a wide range of measures, policies and actions.

Mr. Kafando (Burkina Faso) (*spoke in French*): My delegation would like at the outset fully to associate itself with the statement made yesterday from this very rostrum on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. I should like also to welcome the presence here of Mr. Abdoulaye Wade, President of the Republic of Senegal. His participation attests clearly to the importance of information and communication technologies (ICT) for Africa and in the context of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

The holding of this Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies for development represents an important stage in the international community's efforts to find practical solutions to the technological revolution and changing economic conditions and in particular to the problem of the digital divide.

New information and communication technologies are, as we all know, one of the pillars of globalization. History has shown that technology has always been a powerful tool in the service of human development and in the struggle against poverty. Yet, technical and technological progress that should bring nations and peoples together and create wealth for all is in stark contrast to the growing development gap between developed and developing countries. Today, in developing countries, and in Africa in particular, computers remain a luxury or a sign of prestige activity reserved only for the wealthy. Neither our public nor our private sectors have the necessary resources to use suitable technological tools or to train their staff to truly meet the challenges of development. Yet the inhabitants of the planet fervently hope that, thanks to information and communication technologies, they will be able to benefit from a higher level of knowledge and means of production better adapted to the international arena.

In this situation, one may wonder what can be done to enable countries such as Burkina Faso and all the others that have been left by the wayside to benefit from the positive spin-off of these new technologies and thus reduce the digital divide. The answer to that question should come first of all through action by countries that need to implement policies that promote innovation, development, suitable skills and access to new information and communication technologies.

Nonetheless, national policies cannot alone make up for the digital divide at the global level. International initiatives and the fair use of world trade regulations and industrial intellectual property rights should help make it possible for the poorest countries to benefit from new technologies. In that context, we welcome the creation of the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force and the Group of Eight Digital Opportunity Task Force, as well as the many other private sector initiatives throughout the world.

It would be desirable for international action in the field of new information and communication technologies to take account of the real needs of beneficiary countries, in particular the least developed ones. The low level of development in least developed countries obliges the international community to

redouble its efforts to improve the integration of these countries into world information networks through innovative and integrative projects. Such projects could be targeted at the following priority areas: to modernize administration through the widespread use of data processing, communications tools and group productivity; to support the creation of trade points that promote commercial transactions; to support education and research by setting up Internet access points in secondary schools and universities; and to set up awareness campaigns and train technicians, producers and users. Of course, for these projects to be viable, they will need the support of an appropriate national communications infrastructure.

From the very outset, Burkina Faso has integrated new communication and information technologies into its development strategy. This is why, in order to transform its vision into reality, in 1999 it drafted a national information and communication infrastructure development plan for the period 2000-2004 that provides, inter alia, for complete radio and television coverage of the national territory. Burkina Faso has also set up an asymmetrical Internet connection linking all its ministries. The country has several public and private web sites that include almost all the print media. As regards mobile telephony, for the past two years two private companies have been providing service at the national level, and this communications tool has become one of the most popular in urban centres.

All of these efforts deserve to be supported, in particular in the poorest countries, through the mobilization of funding for programmes and projects. Here, the part played by the United Nations can be decisive. Let us hope that this meeting and the World Summit on the Information Society, to be held in Geneva in 2003 and in Tunis in 2005, will make the stakeholders even more aware of the need for increased support for the poorer countries in developing new information and communication technologies as a means of combating poverty.

Mr. Adam (Israel): At the outset, my delegation would like to join other speakers in congratulating the President of the General Assembly and the Government of the Republic of Korea; both have played a significant role in drawing attention to the issue of information and communication technologies (ICT). We would also like to commend the work of the Economic and Social Council and this year's President, Ambassador Ivan Šimonović of Croatia. We wish also to thank the President of Senegal and the Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union. Finally, I wish to recognize the invaluable work of the United Nations ICT Task Force and its secretariat and all other stakeholders which have taken part in our important endeavour to narrow the digital divide.

Israel is proud to be taking part in today's discussion on information and communication technologies for development. In the course of our lifetime, we have been witness to the most extraordinary technological revolution in history, one that has transformed nations, economies, cultures — indeed, the entire world. Our challenge today is to harness this incredible new power and to channel its energy into productive endeavours that benefit the whole of humanity, particularly in the areas of medicine and public health, knowledge and education, capacity-building and the public good.

And yet, as we debate the uses of high technology — personal computers, advanced telecommunications, satellite and wireless technology and the Internet — we cannot lose sight of the fact that, for most of the world's population, the mere presence of a telephone line is still a major technological phenomenon. In a world where 2 billion people live on less than one dollar a day, it is not surprising that only about 10 per cent of the world's population is connected to a telephone. In sub-Saharan Africa, the figure drops to 0.5 per cent, and we have all heard other figures mentioned by previous speakers in connection with Africa. Africa and the least developed countries are, indeed, the core of the matter.

In terms of access to personal computers, the numbers are even more dismal. While the high-income countries boast nearly 350 personal computers per 1,000 people, the rest of the world cannot muster even 40 per 1,000. In sub-Saharan Africa, there are less than 10 computers per 1,000 people. Approximately one third of the world's population has less than 15 personal computers per 1,000 people. With personal computer numbers so low, it is to be expected that figures on Internet use would be even lower. High-income countries boast an average of 610 Internet hosts per 10,000 people, while low-income countries have less than one host per 10,000 people. These numbers paint a stark picture — too many individuals in too many nations lack access to the basic tools and

infrastructure necessary for economic and social advancement.

While some nations have seen their prosperity soar during the technological revolution, most nations still lack the tools even to get airborne. Our objective here this week must be to rectify that problem and narrow the so-called digital divide, which in the modern world is a prerequisite for narrowing economic and social inequities.

Although Israel is one of the most technologically advanced countries, even in Israel we are not immune to the wide disparities between rich and poor. High-income Israelis enjoy the benefits of technology penetration at a rate 13 times higher than do low-income Israelis. Approximately one in every five Israelis is connected to the Internet. While 30 per cent of the residents of the centre of the country are connected, however, along the periphery and among minority groups that figure drops to 5 per cent.

Since 1997, Israel has been acting to minimize these differences. I would like to provide some examples. In 1997, the Government instituted a programme entitled "A computer for every child". Through that programme, more than 32,000 students in 73 low-income communities — nearly 20 per cent of all Israeli schoolchildren — have received computers.

Another major initiative is the Tapuach project, whose primary goal is to bring the Internet to low-income groups in developing neighbourhoods within each city. The programme has proved to be extremely successful, largely due to the public-private partnership that has funded and organized it.

Another project, initiated by an Israeli member of the Knesset, is the Lehava programme, aimed at narrowing social gaps by providing thousands of students with exposure to information and communication technologies. Lehava, which is the Hebrew word for "flame of knowledge", establishes community centres in low-income neighbourhoods and peripheral towns that provide computer terminals and high-speed access to the Internet. Instructors spend up to 14 hours a day working with disadvantaged young people, providing them with the essential tools they need to succeed in the information age. A total of $100 million has been allocated for this programme over the next four years.

Many technology-development projects have been conceived as bridges between Israel and its neighbours. The non-profit Peres Centre for Peace has been at the forefront of this effort, spearheading efforts to promote coexistence through technological collaboration. The Peace Technology Fund is the first international venture capital fund designed to promote private sector development in the Palestinian territories while building lasting commercial ties among Israeli, Palestinian and international companies. The Peres Centre for Peace has also been heavily involved in establishing joint programmes, such as the Jenin-Afula project and the technology park in Tulkarm. Conveniently located near to Israeli high-tech centres, the park will serve to promote joint ventures between Israelis and Palestinians. These programmes illustrate the essential need for partnership among the public and private sectors and civil society if the process is to succeed. We appreciate the role of the private sector in the organization of the working breakfast this morning.

Promoting technology education and high-tech industry is, indeed, the challenge of the modern age and an imperative for those working for the economic and social development of the poorest corners of the world. If we are to meet the Millennium Development Goals, we must address the scarcity of technological equipment and knowledge in the developing world.

More than one main actor is leading the efforts of the world community. The United Nations ICT Task Force, the World Bank's global digital initiative, the Group of Eight Digital Opportunity Task Force and the United Nations Development Programme's digital divide initiative, as well as the programmes of the International Telecommunication Union, are just a few of the programmes that have been set up. We must ensure coordination and harmonization between and among all agencies and initiatives in order to achieve maximum output.

This is the challenge that we face this week. We owe it to the millions — indeed, the billions — who still do not enjoy the benefits of even a telephone, let alone clean water and adequate food supplies, to address this disparity in a firm and resolute manner.

Mr. De Ruyt (Belgium) (*spoke in French*): I would like first of all to convey my gratitude to the President of the General Assembly for having taken the initiative of convening this meeting and for having organized it so well. Because of his determination, the

General Assembly is addressing for the first time a theme that will become increasingly central to the issue of development: the influence that information technologies will have and the efforts that we should make to ensure that that influence is positive, rather than negative.

In this respect, I would like say at the outset that we would be absolutely wrong to identify in this emerging debate only the dangers that the new information and communication technologies revolution entail for developing countries. We should not address this issue only from the perspective of what has become known as the digital divide. The exponential development of new information technologies does, indeed, involve the risk of increasing differences, and we must counter that. But the new post-industrial revolution offers new and, perhaps, spectacular ways of accelerating development.

If we consider the number of current users of telephones and computers and how much it costs to use them, it seems clear that there is a risk that such technologies will widen the gap between our States. But the current phase is a temporary one: by their very nature, these communication devices will bring us all closer to one another. The main condition for transforming what is believed to be a vicious circle into a virtuous circle is — as many speakers have said during this meeting — that we all work together to improve access for the greatest number of people.

The main challenge faced by all of us, therefore, is to put information and communication technologies in the service of sustainable development. Informatics and telematics are not merely technologies. We can and should harness their potential as a tool for transforming our societies. They can also serve as a catalyst for economic growth. The Internet fosters economic freedom, brings about change and creates new job categories. It promotes healthy competition and allows unprecedented spread of economic, commercial and technological information.

In terms of development, information technologies should be harnessed to a much greater extent as instruments of social cohesion and the fight against poverty, provided, as I said earlier, that available information is made accessible to everyone throughout the world. Distance learning makes it possible to gain low-cost access to audiences that were hitherto out of reach. By increasing the number of community Internet access centres — telecentres — it is now possible to build information feeder roads to marginalized communities. Telemedicine also has the potential for major progress across borders.

In this respect, I listened with great interest to the statement of President Wade of Senegal and to the examples that he gave of the concrete initiatives that have been taken in his country and that he suggested we might take. My country welcomes the initiative of creating an e-Africa commission as part of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), which Belgium, like its European Union partners, strongly supports.

New technologies should also be a tool for good governance. By definition, the Internet implies transparency. A dynamic e-government strategy can deeply transform public administration, whether, for example, in terms of transparency and effectiveness of public procurement, or in terms of information for citizens and rationalizing and simplifying their contacts with government. In that respect, the Belgian Government has made administrative simplification one of its priorities, which in particular includes the publication of online forms. E-government can transform Kafka's ancient castle into a glass house by bringing citizens closer to the seat of power and by fostering the emergence of better informed public opinion and a more active citizenship, and thus a dynamic of participatory democracy.

New technologies are also a tool for the protection of the environment. They contribute to accelerating the transition towards a society that pollutes less and devours fewer resources, a society that is more oriented towards services and less towards industrial production. They also play a crucial role in transforming our consumption and production patterns, and are essential to ensuring access by citizens to environmental information and to spreading good environmental practices. New work practices such as distance working are harbingers of a much more rational use of our time and resources.

Our debate today is the first step in a long reflection that should lead to ambitious political conclusions commensurate with the emerging revolution at the International Telecommunication Union Summit to be held next year in Geneva and in Tunis in 2005.

What can our Governments accomplish here and now to turn information technologies into a unifying tool rather than a multiplier of inequalities at the global level? First of all, they can create and develop an environment of freedom and political, economic and legal stability that makes it possible for companies and citizens the world over to fully harness the potential of new technologies.

Basic education is also a fundamental prerequisite. We should ensure together, in accordance with the commitment adopted in the Millennium Declaration, that by the year 2015, children everywhere — boys and girls alike — will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling, and that girls and boys will have equal access to all levels of education.

Governments should also liberalize telecommunications markets without delay, so as to lower the cost of access to the Internet.

Our Governments should protect the rights of citizens to communicate, to express themselves freely and to be informed. They should also protect their right to privacy and, in particular, their right to be protected against any discrimination on the basis of medical and/or genetic data.

At the multilateral level, we should cooperate more on issues such as copyright, computer security, electronic trading standards, legal and tax questions and combating computer crime. Harmonizing practices will also help to bridge the digital divide.

Finally, as far as developed countries are concerned, we should integrate the technological dimension into our development aid strategies. In that regard, we have a lot of catching up to do. Traditional cooperation is still far from having grasped the full potential of new technologies for sustainable development. It is far from having drawn the conclusions, in terms of horizontal integration, of the technological dimension in its strategies and programmes as a tool for transforming societies, and not only as one of several technical means.

From 1 to the 5 July 2002, delegates will meet in a preparatory committee in Geneva in order to launch a long process. I hope that our debate — which I thank the President once again for having organized — will contribute to crystallising a shared vision of the emergence of an information society that is accessible and beneficial for all.

Mr. Jegermanis (Latvia): I am delighted to speak on the question of information and communication technologies (ICT) for development. Recent decades have demonstrated the profound effect these technologies have on our societies. The spread of the Internet has increased opportunities for communication and the flow of ideas, as well as created new ways to boost productivity.

The development of ICT in Latvia has contributed to the sustained economic growth of recent years, which in turn fosters rising funds for such projects as e-education and e-government. Partnerships with the private sector in either of these areas have been, and will be, crucial. An equally important step towards a more conducive ICT environment in Latvia has been the adoption of legislation related to these technologies, such as the legislation concerning electronic signatures and electronic commerce.

However, a significant part of humanity is not able to reap the benefits of ICT. Therefore, it is none too soon for the United Nations to seriously address this issue. I would like to convey our delegation's full support for the initiatives taken by the United Nations in the last several years through the Economic and Social Council and the creation of the ICT Task Force. While, as in all areas, the prime responsibility lies with the countries themselves, there are ICT areas which are characteristically international. Examples are security and privacy issues and the regulation of e-commerce, and other uses of ICT where no comprehensive results can be achieved by individual countries.

The World Summit on the Information Society, to be held in Geneva in 2003 and in Tunisia in 2005, will be of the utmost importance as a venue for turning the digital divide into a digital opportunity. As its formal preparatory process will start shortly, it is imperative that the full potential of this event be fully utilized from the very beginning. Both private sector and non-governmental participation in the process would be of great value to the outcome of the Summit, since experience suggests the great role that can be played by various partnerships in ICT development.

ICT is not a goal in itself, but rather a tool to advance economic, educational and cultural development. The United Nations must seize this

opportunity and utilize ICT to reach the goals set by the Member States in the Millennium Declaration.

Mr. Francese (Italy): Allow me, first of all, to express the satisfaction of my delegation for the work done here today, under the President's guidance, at this Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communications technologies (ICT). We are gathered here because information and communication technologies have proven to be one of the most powerful forces in shaping the twenty-first century. As stated by the representative of Spain on behalf of the European Union, whose intervention my delegation fully endorses, ICT affect the way people live, learn and work, as well as the way Governments work and interact with civil society. They have become a vital growth engine for the world economy, creating enormous opportunities for individuals, companies and communities throughout the world.

Italy views the information society as an instrument that should enable people to fulfil their potential and realize their aspirations. That is why we must ensure that information and communication technologies serve the mutually supportive goals of creating sustainable economic growth, enhancing public welfare and fostering social cohesion. They have the potential to strengthen democracy, increase transparency and accountability in governance, promote human rights, enhance cultural diversity, and, finally, foster international peace and stability.

Thus we must make it our job to ensure that this potential is fully realized. To meet these goals and to address emerging challenges, particularly in less industrialized countries and technically less advanced societies, we need effective national and international strategies. To that end, the Italian Government held an International Conference on E-government for Development, in cooperation with the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, on 10 and 11 April last.

Bridging the digital divide within and among countries has become a critical item on our respective national agendas. Every country should have access to information and communication networks, and the Italian Government is deeply committed to the efforts being made to formulate and implement a coherent strategy to address this issue.

There is a growing recognition by industry and civil society as well of the need to bridge the divide, and we welcome that recognition. A key feature of Italy's response to this challenge, in fact, has been the mobilization of the expertise and resources of both. We are pursuing an effective partnership between government and civil society that is able to keep up with the rapid pace of technological and market development.

At the same time, we are fully aware that ICT represents an opportunity not to be missed for emerging developing economies. Countries that succeed in harnessing their potential will be able to bypass the obstacles of infrastructure development and more effectively achieve vital development goals such as poverty reduction, better health care and sanitation, and better schooling.

Information and communication technologies have helped Governments improve the quality, delivery and reliability of services to citizens and businesses alike. E-government is also crucial for narrowing the gap between developing countries and the industrialized world. Implementing effective e-government means creating a central and local government administrative system that is verifiable, efficient and effective. It implies improving the ability of Governments to respond to the information needs of their citizens and to disseminate development opportunities.

Effective e-government also means simplifying and increasing opportunities for trade and transactions between citizens and between the private sector and the government sector. Putting government services online will open up access to general information; better disseminate information on rules, laws and existing opportunities; discourage corruption; and encourage citizens, especially young people, to learn how to use basic computer systems.

Both the G-8 Digital Opportunity Task (DOT) Force and the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force have identified the vital role that e-government can play in broadening access to information technologies.

At the general summit last year, the G-8 leaders adopted a DOT Force action plan aimed at spreading government resources in order to strengthen democracy and the rule of law by empowering citizens and making the provision of central government services more efficient.

At the recent Palermo Conference on E-Government for Development, the Italian Government launched an initiative on e-government for development, aimed at promoting innovative forms of technological cooperation with developing countries based on the design and implementation of operational projects with measurable results. The initiative contributes to the dissemination of information about e-government and its programme and implementation in countries that have only partially, or not at all, exploited the full potential of this important tool.

Italy's approach entails, first, the development of a reference model for public administration digital functions and services that can subsequently be tailored to the needs and features of each country. In the model, special emphasis is placed on the management of public accounts, an area in which improvement is crucial for countries that wish to attract more official development assistance and more foreign investment. A task force has been established to design this model. Its members are experts from the civil service and non-profit organizations as well as officials of ICT companies.

Secondly, a partnership has been created with, to start, five countries — Albania, Jordan, Mozambique, Nigeria and Tunisia — to implement specific e-government projects in the priority areas indicated by the countries themselves. We are currently working with those countries to define e-government operational projects that are focused on each one's organizational priorities and specific requirements. The possibility to expand the partnership of the countries will be considered in the near future.

Thirdly, Italy's approach involves the promotion of an action plan on how e-government can strengthen democracy and the rule of law, giving citizens a central position and improving the delivery of essential public services.

I should like to inform the Assembly that the response of the international community to this initiative was very positive. An increasing number of countries have applied for assistance to introduce the reference model and apply it towards the modernization of their public administrations. The World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank and the European Commission all have expressed their support for its objectives. On the basis of that response, Italy will submit a specifically tailored plan of action on e-government to the next G-8 summit.

Finally, we cannot underestimate the challenge of bridging the digital divide. Gaps in basic economic and social infrastructures such as electricity, telecommunications and education still represent a major obstacle, but we cannot let the complexity of the challenge be a pretext for inaction. There is only one road to take: concrete action to achieve concrete results. We appeal to other countries to join our efforts and work in the same constructive spirit to ensure that new technologies truly benefit all of humankind.

Mr. Musambachime (Zambia): On behalf of my delegation, I wish to commend the President for convening this important plenary Meeting devoted to information and communication technologies (ICT).

My delegation would like to associate itself with the statement made on behalf of the Group of 77 and China by the Vice-Minister for Science and Technology of Venezuela, Mr. Rudolf Römer.

This Meeting is most opportune, coming at a time when the United Nations has put in place the Information and Communication Technologies Task Force. My delegation is pleased that the meeting is being held in accordance with General Assembly resolution 56/258 of 31 January 2002, as well as resolution 56/183 of 21 December 2001, in which the Assembly welcomed the fact that the World Summit on the Information Society would be held in December 2003 in Geneva and in December 2005 in Tunis.

My delegation is most encouraged by the fact that the Task Force brings together Government representatives, the United Nations system, the private sector, non-governmental organizations and academic society. We are pleased also that the Meeting is addressing the digital divide in the context of globalization and the development process, and is promoting coherence and synergy between regional and international information and communication technologies initiatives.

My delegation welcomes the measures aimed at enhancing the promotion of ICT technologies, particularly in Africa. Zambia took note of the Secretary-General's report on the role of the ICT task force. The Secretary-General noted that the Task Force should set bold targets and goals with specific time-frames and carry out stakeholder campaigns to

mobilize Governments, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, academics and local communities to achieve these goals, bringing the best and most valuable talent to bear on these efforts. While striving for longer-term goals, the Task Force should also aim at short-term wins with tangible and visible results.

My delegation concurs with the Chairman of the United Nations ICT Task Force, who noted that ICT has unquestionably become one of the key development challenges for Africa. There is need for strong partnerships and knowledge- and information-sharing mechanisms to meet the challenges. There is certainly a need in Africa to secure political will at the highest possible level for optimizing the opportunities in an information and knowledge age for political, social, financial and cultural development.

Despite their limitations, many African countries have embraced information and communication technologies. Electronic mail has been adopted by almost every agency with international communication needs. In some countries, Internet use is cheap enough to allow the exchange and transmission of valuable market information. The Internet is also being increasingly used for distance education. Students are able to use the World Wide Web to seek information and obtain advice and reading materials. Farmers are also benefiting by accessing information on inputs, pest control and markets. Nurses operating in villages use digital cameras to download and transfer images of patients' symptoms to nearby towns for examination by doctors. Doctors are using telemedicine to seek advice, learn about new techniques of treating certain diseases and exchange information between rural and urban hospitals. Governments are also using information technology to inform the public and accelerate the flow of information between ministries. Parliaments are tapping into it to keep up with developments in various parts of the world.

Some countries in sub-Saharan Africa are using the new technologies as a means of enhancing other activities. For example, coastal countries are increasingly using the Internet for surveillance, control and protection of fisheries. There are approaches involving radical changes in attitudes, as well as the incorporation of new research to make learning more effective. There are also many other uses, such as in banking, weather forecasting, crime detection, accessing libraries, commerce, e-development and in the information and telecommunication sectors.

We would like to commend the United Nations for introducing a programme to promote digital technology in sub Saharan-Africa and to bridge the divide. Technological transformation hinges on the ability of each country to unleash the creativity of its people, thus enabling them to access, learn, understand, appreciate and master the new technology, to innovate and to adapt it to their needs and capacities.

With the Government's policy of encouraging investment in telecommunications, cellular telephone systems in my country have been expanding. A number of players in this field have been assisted in opening up telecommunications. As a member of the International Telecommunications Satellite Organization, Zambia has an earth station in Lusaka that provides direct telephone, telefax, e-mail and television links with the rest of the world. The Zambia Telecommunications Company remains the major provider of all types of telecommunication services throughout the country. The vast majority of the exchanges are already automatic.

Another landmark development in Zambia's telecommunications network took place on 10 June 2002 with the launching by one of the service providers of an international roaming network for making and receiving calls on the global system for mobile telecommunications (GSM). This network will enable people visiting and living in Zambia to connect with other countries.

In conclusion, my delegation welcomes more investment in telecommunications, in line with what the Secretary-General said in his report on the ICT Task Force: "The challenge is not solely to bridge the existing global 'digital divide', but to avert the prospect of its rapidly growing wider." (*E/2001/7, para. 40*)

The meeting rose at 1.05 p.m.